

Some Reflections on the Teaching of Military History in Canada

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Military History occupies a somewhat tenuous position in the curricula of Canadian universities. It is most often regarded as a kind of marginal enterprise to be offered by a faculty member who has some side-interest in these matters as a relief from the more serious social, economic and cultural questions with which History is properly concerned. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. It is, quite to the contrary, a tradition which stretches back to the very beginning of history as an academic discipline in the 19th century. It was particularly the attitude within the British historical profession. Edward Creasy, who wrote a popular history called *Fifteen Decisive Battles of the World*, prefaced his work with the following: "It is an honourable characteristic of the spirit of the age that projects of violence and warfare are regarded among civilized states with gradually increasing aversion," a faultless Victorian sentiment, and he concluded on an even more optimistic note, "In closing our observations in this the last of the Decisive Battles of the World [the battle of Waterloo], it is pleasing to contrast the year in which it signalized with the year that is now passing over our heads . . ." He was writing in 1851 and so he naturally draws attention to the Great Exhibition - "We see the banners of every civilized nation waving over the arena of our competition with each other . . . and no battlefield ever witnessed a victory more noble than

which England . . . is now teaching the peoples of the earth to achieve over selfish prejudices and international feuds, in the great cause of the general promotion of industry and welfare of mankind."

During this period the historical profession was of the opinion that it needed to concern itself with the long-term evolution of political and economic institutions in which war, usually a cataclysmic event, could not play a significant role. J.R. Green, in his preface to the *Short History of the English People* [1875] summed up the attitude when he wrote, "It is a reproach of historians that they have too often turned history into a mere history of butchery of men by their fellow men. But war plays a small part in the real story of European nations, and in that of England its part is smaller than in any other. The only war which profoundly affected English society and English Government is the hundred years war with France (1336 to 1451)."

Some of the best accounts of the general histories of Europe tend to follow Green's advice "that war plays a small part in the real story of European nations . . ." For instance in A. J. P. Taylor's most distinguished contribution to European history - *The Struggle for the Mastery of Europe* - his chapter entitled "The End of French Primacy" - that is, the Franco-Prussian War - there are two pages on the complications

and alterations of the "Ems telegram" but only one sentence on the actual military operations leading to the defeat of the French Army. Taylor is truly an important historian, but clearly he has left out a great deal. A quick survey of the older standard works in Canadian history reveals a similar imbalance - Lower, Morton, Creighton and McInnis devote remarkably little space even to the major military events in Canadian history - such as the First and Second World Wars - Creighton perhaps slightly more than the others. Apart from C.P. Stacey, more recent text book writers offer little more.

That incontrovertibly cataclysmic event in the history of Europe, the First World War, really did not alter anything very much in the historical profession, particularly among English-speaking historians. In the 1920s the major historical controversies revolved around the questions of the importance of social versus political history and the diplomatic history of the pre-war period. The military history of the war was quickly left to the "official military historians" while others went on to deal with the "real" history of Britain and Europe - which in a sense had been so rudely interrupted by four and a half years of senseless slaughter. The major interpretations of what happened during that time, for example to the British Army, really came from the Lloyd George and Churchill memoirs and were incorporated into general histories without many questions about their accuracy.

The sentiments which led historians to avoid dealing with wars and military organizations are of course the most worthy ones. If indeed one could change the course of history by avoiding unpleasant subjects one would almost be inclined to say, "Well a few lies and distortions are well worth it, if that will ensure peace and security in the future." Unfortunately the worthy sentiments of the 19th century historians did not bring about a 20th century without wars and the growth of military organizations. Indeed even after two of the most devastating wars in human history, it is remarkable that the longest period without a major international war which the 20th century

has enjoyed is known as the era of the "Cold War". This constant threat of military confrontation since 1945 has indeed led to a considerable revival of military history which might well be attributed to these somewhat harsh realities, but at the same time it is clear that except for courses in "conflict resolution" in Political Science departments and the few courses in "War and Society" and the "History of the Second World War" [with courses on the Civil War and Vietnam in U.S. universities], there are relatively few programs outside the military academies which deal fully with the subject - and even Sandhurst has recently closed its History Department in an effort to save money.

"Military history still tends to be regarded as a somewhat esoteric subject"

Nevertheless, the past twenty years have produced a whole roster of distinguished historians who have given us some of the most profound interpretations of the major conflicts of the past and have reminded us that while historians who study war must not isolate their work from the society in which the wars took place, it should also be understood that "War has been part of the totality of human experience, the parts of which can be understood only in relation to one another. One cannot adequately describe how wars are fought without giving some idea of what they were fought about." [Foreword to *War in European Society* by Michael Howard (1975)]. While these historians from Richard Preston to Paul Kennedy have made some impact on the writing of history, so far, they have made relatively little impact on the curricula of the universities. Military history still tends to be regarded as a somewhat esoteric subject, one that has nothing to do with finding one's cultural roots, castigating the endless immorality of the effervescent middle classes, illustrating the recently discovered moral superiority of the current generation or raising the consciousness of the present with regard to the past and the

continuing destruction of the environment. The fact that military historians may share many or all of the views of their colleagues with regard to contemporary problems and may well feel that they have the well-being of humanity as much at heart as anyone else, does not appear to have changed the situation with regard to the teaching of the subject. This in spite of the relatively large number of graduate students who take a military or a military-related subject as their thesis topic even with the knowledge that the decision may hurt their chances of getting a job.

This is a curious phenomenon which has some serious consequences. It is curious because one can go into any medium-sized book store and find two sections of books on history - one of which is labelled "Military History" and the other just "History". There is clearly an enormous appetite for books which deal with the wars of the twentieth century and, in the U.S., for books which deal with the Civil War. There are many books on these shelves which really only seek to satisfy those whose interests lie in weapons and uniforms, but there is also a great deal which offers the readers excellent analyses of crucial importance to the general histories of various countries. Many of these books and some of the truly exceptional "official" histories of the Second World War - of which Stacey's volumes are surely among the very best - stay on the shelves in our libraries because there are few courses available which encourage students to read them. However, outside the universities the obvious interest which the presence of these book sections illustrate is also served by films and television. There have been any number of films in recent years which have depicted with some accuracy major events of the Second World War - *The Longest Day*, *A Bridge Too Far* and *Midway* spring to mind. These are obviously fictional accounts although they often deal with historical figures and try to portray them and the events surrounding them with an honest attempt at reasonable accuracy. George C. Scott's portrayal of Patton, for instance, was a brilliant performance, but no one seriously interested in the career of this American general could be satisfied with the

film - any more than anyone interested in the reign of Richard III could accept Shakespeare's play as a serious historical source. And of course there is no pretence that these dramas are anything but fictional accounts.

Documentaries on television, however, very often do make the assertion that they examine in a serious manner major historical events, and because they usually do not have any film footage for their subjects, they sometimes dress up people to look like the historical figures and then call their products "docudramas." Some documentaries may indeed be very serious attempts to come to grips with a major historical problem - like the PBS series on the American Civil War. Others, however, take the view that since there are many opinions on any particular subject, all opinions are equally valid and the one that expresses their own particular beliefs and ideals is bound to be the right one. That is, of course, a contradictory position but the fact that it is contradictory only seems to add to the fervour with which it is held. The question of evidence is really not important, films and television do not have to provide footnotes, indeed under no circumstances must the evidence, if indeed it is looked for at all, be allowed to sway the opinions and prejudices of the script writers.

The recent CBC series on the Second World War entitled *The Valour and the Horrors* a case in point. The outrageous nature of this series, in my opinion, did not lie in the interpretation of events offered by the scriptwriters, although it was difficult at times to know how these interpretations were reached. What emerged was that the writers believed themselves to be the first people on earth to have observed that war killed people and was therefore a "bad" thing. The script implied that, if only they had been in charge of the Canadian military, virtually no Canadian soldiers, very few German soldiers, and certainly no German civilians would have been killed during the course of the war. But apart from the question of interpretation, the problem was that the writers did seem to believe that the Canadian public was ready to accept almost any kind of statement about the war, no matter how untrue,

because there are few people who have any real acquaintance with the actual course of the campaigns in which something like one million Canadians participated.

Can it be that they are right? Even the CBC would hardly air a "docudrama" in which the statement is made, without supporting evidence, that some Canadian cabinet ministers gave orders to kill the members of the political opposition - but no one appears to have questioned the statement made in *The Valour and the Horror* [p. 18 Post-Production Script - Normandy Episode] that "Some Canadian Generals did give orders to take no prisoners. ..." Perhaps there is evidence for this but then surely this is the place to show it. The program was full not only of misleading implications but also of simple straightforward "mistakes" - like putting German divisions where they were not - no doubt mistakes anyone can make - though given the constant criticism in the series of the incompetence of the Canadian officers in Normandy and everywhere else - it seems a pity that the critics themselves seem unable to read a map.

Nevertheless my criticism is not levelled at the CBC. I do believe that this program and others like it can only be aired by our television studios because they are confident that there will be no general laughter at such childish

attempts to deal with a serious subject. My criticism is levelled at the comparatively limited place that military history still has in our curricula and that as such each generation of graduates leaves our universities woefully ignorant of an important aspect of the past even when the individual student's specialty in university was History.

This is not a plea to bring some form of what used to be called "drum and trumpet" history into our universities or to use military history courses as a form of indoctrination in the virtues of the Canadian military past. It is rather a plea not to exclude an important part of human history simply because it happens to be complicated and often unpleasant. The work that has recently been done in the field of "military history" and in "war and society" has, in many cases, been of such high quality in terms of the general understanding of history that not to incorporate it fully into the history programs in our universities seems a wilful neglect of a major aspect of the human past.

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